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Thirty-eighth session
1 to 26 June 1996 (part I)

Draft report

Rapporteur: Mr. Thomas **Schlesinger** (Austria)

Addendum

Report of the Joint Inspection Unit (item 6)

United Nations publications: enhancing cost-effectiveness in implementing legislative mandates

1. At its 6th and 7th meetings, on 3 June 1998, the Committee considered the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "United Nations publications: enhancing cost-effectiveness in implementing legislative mandates" (A/51/946) and the comments of the Secretary-General thereon (A/52/685). The report of the Joint Inspection Unit was introduced by Mr. Sumihiro Kuyama, Inspector. The representative of the Department of Public Information introduced the note by the Secretary-General containing his comments.

Discussion

2. Appreciation was expressed to the Inspectors for the interesting and useful document and for its timely issuance, as well as to the Secretary-General for providing detailed and considered comments thereon. Regret was expressed that the discussion of this question, as well as action on the recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit, had been postponed in the General Assembly for a number of years and that a more up-to-date paper on publications policy was not available. It was noted that recommendations 1, 2, 5 and 9 had been considered by the Committee on Conferences at its substantive session of 1997 (A/52/32).

3. The view was expressed that many recommendations contained in the report of the Joint Inspection Unit would contribute to greater cost-effectiveness of the Organization's

98-17093 (E) 250698

publications. It was also pointed out that the report should have been confined to cost-effectiveness and not cover wider policy issues.

4. It was stated that the aim of publications was to fulfil an identifiable need and that they should therefore be demand-driven, cost-effective and not duplicate publications produced either inside or outside of the Organization. Doubt was expressed that the Organization would be in a position to coordinate with outside publications. The view was expressed that while the same subject may be covered by several departments and units at Headquarters and other duty stations, there were different perspectives and divergent strategies that should lead to flexibility on the part of programme managers regarding publications policies. It was suggested that the Organization consider the question of authors' rights. It was also suggested that there be more coordination within the United Nations system on publications policies. It was pointed out that different types of publications were not classified in the report.

5. The importance of full respect for legislative mandates and the key role of intergovernmental bodies were emphasized. The view was expressed that legislative bodies should review the mandates for publications and assess whether the publications continued to be relevant and useful, as suggested by the Joint Inspection Unit in recommendation 1. The view was expressed that this issue was being addressed by different bodies, resulting in the reduction of publications, and that there was no urgency to address it further. Reservations were expressed to recommendation 1. Reservations were also expressed to recommendation 5, concerning specific mandates for publications, as delegations believed that it was important to retain flexibility in the decisions to produce publications. Concerning recommendation 9, on the subject of requests for new publications subsequent to those approved in the programme budget and the incorporation of a time-frame, strong opposition was expressed to a "sunset rule" and to the recommendation. The rule was also characterized as "very dangerous". While the view was expressed that such a rule should not be automatic in all cases, others were in strong support of this type of rule. Concern was expressed that so far only development-related entities launched the initiative of thorough review of their publications, whereas there was no initiative from other entities. It was recalled that the Committee was under a remit to assess the continuing validity of legislative mandates of more than five years standing. Support was expressed for the Joint Inspection Unit finding that the Committee's function of reviewing mandates needed to be strengthened. The view was also expressed, however, that a decision on recommendation 9 be deferred until the General Assembly had decided on the Secretary-General's proposal regarding the sunset rule.

6. While appreciating the importance of the Publications Board in rationalizing and overseeing publications policy, the view was expressed that this should in no way be interpreted as a kind of censorship authority over what departments produced. It was emphasized that substantive departments should take responsibility for their publications.

7. Support was expressed for the recommendation of the Joint Inspection Unit that all proposed publications programmes should be approved prior to the preparation of each biennial programme budget. It was thus suggested that the Secretary-General review the composition of the Publications Board, and that alternative arrangements should be considered. The question was raised whether a senior officer had been appointed as a full time secretary to the Board.

8. Support was expressed for the Organization's use of advanced technology in producing and disseminating publications in a cost-effective manner, in particular for its Internet site. However, the need to carefully assess the utility of publications was expressed, including assessment of other means of achieving the desired objectives. Notwithstanding the progress

that had been achieved within the United Nations in electronic publishing, it was held that traditional print processes should continue to be utilized for the production of publications. With regard to the utility and readership of publications, the view was also expressed that the impact and effectiveness of publications that were meant to promote global awareness and advocacy could be enhanced by the adoption of objective circulation policies that targeted the intended readership.

9. It was also stressed that the final decision on the outsourcing of printing (recommendation 12) should be taken after consideration of the comprehensive report by the Secretary-General on outsourcing practices and its consideration by the General Assembly.

10. The importance of the sale of publications, both in print and electronic versions, as an income-generating activity was underlined. Strong support was expressed for the Joint Inspection Unit recommendations concerning timely production of sales income reports, more flexible treatment of sales income and more vigorous sales promotion to maximize financial returns to the United Nations. Support was also expressed concerning the policy of tier-pricing. The view was expressed that the concerns of the developing countries should be taken into account when discussing the raise in sales income.

11. While underlining the need to enhance budgetary control of publications, support was expressed for the call by the Joint Inspection Unit for a more complete cost-accounting system for publications. The view was expressed that there should be a more flexible use of funds in the external printing accounts. Regret was expressed that the report focused solely on the cost-effectiveness of the publications and did not address the issue of late submission of documentation to the intergovernmental bodies, which impacted on the effectiveness of their work.

12. With reference to paragraph 7 of the comments of the Secretary-General (A/52/685, annex), it was observed that in the biennium 1996-1997, some publications were affected because of budgetary constraints. The continued review and prioritization of publications in their programmes, despite the fact that the General Assembly had approved the proposed budget for the biennium 1998-1999, was questioned. It was stated that it was not the job of the Secretariat to set priorities; it was the prerogative of Member States.

13. It was expressed that paragraph 14 of the report of the Joint Inspection Unit was not relevant to the subject of the report. The view was expressed that the Inspectors should have avoided discussion of the issue raised in paragraph 14 in the report and should have focused on the cost-effectiveness of United Nations publications.

Conclusions and recommendations

14. The Committee stressed that publications play an important role in raising public awareness and promoting the activities of the United Nations.

15. The Committee endorsed recommendations 2, 10 and 16 of the Joint Inspection Unit.

16. Emphasizing the continuing relevance of printed publications, the Committee endorsed recommendation 14, on the understanding that the question of provision of funds for the work would be reviewed by relevant bodies.

17. On the understanding that the Publications Board would facilitate, rather than control, the publications and that the relevant intergovernmental bodies and substantive departments must take primary responsibility for their output vis-à-vis substance, namely, effectiveness and relevance to mandates, the Committee endorsed recommendations 4 and 6 and

recommended that the composition of the Board be reviewed, including the consideration of alternative arrangements.

18. The Committee recommended that recommendations 3, 7, 8, 11 to 13, 17 and 18 be considered by the relevant bodies dealing with administrative and budgetary questions before the General Assembly takes a final decision on these recommendations.

19. The Committee did not reach consensus on recommendations 1, 5, 9 and 15.

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Addendum

Improving the working methods and procedures of the Committee for Programme and Coordination within the framework of its mandate (item 7)

1. The item entitled "Improving the working methods and procedures of the Committee for Programme and Coordination within the framework of its mandate" was included in the programme of work of the Committee as an approach to encourage the promotion of all its potential. To this end, no change in the mandate of the Committee was contemplated. Only practical difficulties needed to be addressed with a view to bolstering the Committee's efficiency and effectiveness. The discussion of the item focused on the issues set out below.

Documentation

2. The documents should be factual and analytical and should be prepared in conformity with legislative mandates in order to facilitate the deliberations of the Committee.

3. Documents should also be submitted in accordance with the six-week rule, and their format should be as specified in paragraphs 24 and 25 of General Assembly resolution 52/214 B of 22 December 1997.

Secretariat

4. The secretariat of the Committee should be responsible for the timely submission of all documentation and should monitor the progress of its preparation, submitting a detailed report to the Committee at the start of the session, including an overview of the degree to which deadlines have been met. The secretariat of the Committee should also convey the

98-18232 (E) 250698

Committee's conclusions and recommendations, as approved by the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly, to the relevant departments of the Secretariat.

Role of observers

5. The participation by observers in the deliberations of the Committee enriches and strengthens the work of the Committee. There should, therefore, be no distinction between the role of the members of the Committee and the observers, except in the case of voting, as stipulated in paragraph 3 of rule 72 of the rules of procedure of the Economic and Social Council. This would facilitate the acceptance of the recommendations and conclusions of the Committee.

6. Some countries rarely get a chance to serve on the Committee. They usually wait for a long time to seek re-election. Therefore, those countries which cannot serve as members of the Committee for a long time benefit by attending its meetings and contributing actively as observers. Participation as an observer in the deliberations can serve as a transitional stage for members and is, therefore, necessary and welcome.

Decision-making

7. Member States should work in a spirit of compromise and willingness, especially since the Committee concludes its work by consensus in accordance with resolution 41/213 of 19 December 1986 annexes I and II thereto.

Preparation of reports

8. Reports of the Committee should be prepared in accordance with the following guidelines:

(a) A summary of additional information that is not contained in the reports of the Secretary-General should, if necessary, be included in the introductory section of the reports;

(b) The discussion section should reflect views expressed in a precise and objective manner. A copy of the interventions made may be provided to the coordinators;

(c) Conclusions and recommendations should be precise, action-oriented and concrete.

9. The discussion section of the report is of particular importance when the Committee is not in a position to reach consensus on the conclusions and recommendations. In such a case, the discussion section should accurately reflect the Committee's deliberations and should contain its explorations and assessments of the reports of the Secretary-General to help the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly for better understanding.

Conclusions and recommendations

10. The role of the Committee in all aspects of its mandate should be strengthened.

11. The Committee stressed that the secretariat should submit necessary documentation on time and in accordance with the six-week rule. Their format should be in accordance with paragraphs 24 and 25 of General Assembly resolution 52/214.

12. The reports of the Secretary-General should conform to the mandates approved by relevant intergovernmental bodies, the Regulations and Rules Governing Programme Planning, the Programme Aspects of the Budget, the Monitoring of Implementation and the Methods of Evaluation, the terms of reference of the Committee and relevant resolutions.

13. In the proposed revisions to the medium-term plan, or in the case of its new draft, legislative mandates should be indicated with each new proposal in the form of footnotes.

14. The discussion section of the reports of the Committee should reflect accurately and objectively the discussion that took place at the meetings. It should not have enumerators such as "one, some or many delegations".

15. The Committee should focus more on the conclusions and recommendations of its reports, which should be precise, action-oriented and concrete. Consideration of its draft reports should start from the conclusions and recommendations section.

16. Observers should be given a full opportunity to participate in meetings of the Committee in the deliberations on any matter of particular concern to them, in accordance with the relevant rules of procedure.

17. The Committee recommended that the secretariat of the Committee be responsible for the timely submission of all documentation and that it monitor the progress of preparation of documentation, submitting a detailed report to the Committee at the start of the session. The secretariat of the Committee should also convey the Committee's conclusions and recommendations, as approved by the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly, to the relevant departments of the Secretariat.

18. The Committee decided to continue consideration of this agenda item.